Is There Research in the Studio?

This article surveys the development of the “research studio” in architectural education and examines its relationship to research, scholarship, and criticism.

Over the last decade, “research studios” have become common in schools of architecture. Investigating clothing, logistics networks, favelas, malls, airports, and cities worldwide, such studios invoke analysis rather than design as their method and aim for publication or exhibition as end products. But, as is often the case in architectural education, this pedagogical model has thus far been little theorized.

Running from 1996 to 2000, Rem Koolhaas’s Harvard Project on the City is the most well-known of these. Over the course of an academic year, teams of architecture students led by Koolhaas explored shopping (Figure 4), Lagos, the Pearl River Delta, and Rome. Although Project is no exception to the prevailing lack of explicit methodological statements in research studios, by looking at its product, we can deduce a method. Research in these kind of studios is architectural in so far as it draws on the processes of information gathering, analysis, and synthesis that an architect undertakes in the early phases of design, utilizing the architect’s skills in structuring visual and verbal communication into a coherent whole.

But just where did the research studio come from? In search of an answer, we might turn back to founding editor Turpin Bannister’s “The Research Heritage of the Architectural Profession,” in the first issue of the Journal of Architectural Education. Bannister traces a long tradition of research in architecture to the Renaissance, a lineage that he observes flourishing in the academies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like scientists, Bannister notes, architects once came together in professional meetings and publications to share their discoveries and to receive input from others. But to Bannister’s lament, in the latter part of the nineteenth century architects gave up their leadership in structural and technological innovation to engineers in favor of pursuing a purified art of design. With remarkable optimism, Bannister envisions the JAE as a key institution in renewing the role of the architect as researcher, capable of sustaining and encouraging such dialogue among architects. Regrettably, Bannister’s hope for the JAE is hardly born out by the evidence of subsequent years. The agenda set out in Bannister’s first issue of the Journal was immediately replaced by the publication of the proceedings of the annual meeting. When articles began a decade later, they were largely polemics about where architecture should go rather than specific accounts of research projects.

Research and scholarship, as such, remained in the purview of the history of architecture, largely a subfield of the history of art or, alternatively, in the realm of architectural technology. The sort of research studio that we are now familiar with would be absent in the academy for a considerable time.

By this point, however, two collaborative practices, that of Charles and Ray Eames and that of Peter and Alison Smithson, began to pioneer early forms of architectural research. The former gained experience in design research through their wartime experimentation with plywood and their work on mass production of plywood splints and plywood. Starting in 1953, the Eameses undertook a series of documentary films such as A Communications Primer (Figure 1) or Powers of Ten, sometimes for clients, sometimes for their own purposes. Often constituted as a rapid succession of images, these films produced what film critic Paul Schrader called “information overload” as a means of delivering one fundamental idea. Ideas were central to the Eameses’ films. Charles explained: “They are not really films at all, just ways to get across an idea.” By contrast, Eames felt that more traditional architectural design had no hope as a medium for ideas since intermediaries such as the bankers, contractors, engineers, and politicians would “cause the concept to degenerate.”

Similarly, in Britain the Smithsons took the world “as found” as a point of exploration, exploring both the city around them and an equally compelling landscape of commodities and advertisements emerging out of postwar rationing. Influenced by Marcel Duchamp’s practice of found objects, the use of photographs of industrial objects in early modern texts by Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, the photographs of East London working class neighborhoods taken by Nigel Henderson, as well as the pioneering work of the Eameses, the Smithsons set out toward “a new seeing of the ordinary, an openness as to how prosaic ‘things’ could re-energise [their] inventive activity.”

The Smithsons’ interest in the everyday life of the East End of London, together with their fascination with commercial images, was influential on a key architectural research project, Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi’s Learning from Las Vegas (Figure 3). According to Scott Brown, for a studio method she drew upon urban planning studios that she had taken at the University of Pennsylvania: “structured research, conducted in teams, with a teaching aim but also aims for research and artistic discovery.” Unlike the work of the Eameses and the Smithsons, Learning from Las Vegas was developed within an architecture studio and maintained a more systematic process of...
investigation into the city. If *Learning from Las Vegas* was a key moment in architectural research, it spawned relatively few followers, with the notable exception of Rem Koolhaas’s own investigation, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. In this work, Koolhaas drew upon the work of Scott Brown and Venturi, together with urban research studios run by O. M. Ungers into various aspects of Berlin, and used the “Paranoid Critical Method,” which he appropriated from Salvador Dali, to blur the boundaries between research and fiction. But like *Learning from Las Vegas*, which remained important mainly in urban planning studios, *Delirious New York* inspired few immediate followers in architecture. Both texts would have to wait a generation for their impact to be felt.

Instead, the discipline turned the lens of architectural research in on itself, taking form as its subject of investigation. More compelling at the time than the work of Scott Brown and Venturi or Koolhaas, architectural historians such as Vincent Scully and Colin Rowe offered influential lessons in design pedagogy elaborating more specifically architectural methods of researching form. “The Formal Basis of Modern Architecture,” Peter Eisenman’s dissertation under Rowe, undertaken in Cambridge and finished in 1963, is the epitome of this sort of work and, had it been published earlier, might have offered a certain kind of model to the discipline. Driven by these early forms of research and by the impact of history and criticism in the studio, architecture began to adopt the trappings of reflexivity. In response, architects began to pose themselves as historians and even as theorists. Some, like Eisenman, went on to get doctorates, but as that demanded a considerable time commitment and generally required that architects study in history of art programs rather than in design studios, most did not. Under postmodernism, which reached its heyday in American architectural education in the mid-1980s, research into historical form and typology began to emerge as a significant aspect of design studios.

Apart from finding a home in the university, research—or at least more speculative production—was made easier in the postwar era by new granting organizations. The Graham Foundation, founded in 1956, and the National Endowment for the Arts, established by the U.S. Congress in 1965, encouraged research-oriented and speculative projects. For example, the Graham Foundation funded Archigram’s *Instant City*, Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction*, and Reyner Banham’s *Los Angeles: Architecture of Four Ecologies*. The Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, which Eisenman directed, served as a key institution during this period, operating from both tuition and grants, supporting a variety of forms of architectural research such as Stanford Anderson’s study of the street, funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, as well as Koolhaas’s *Delirious New York*.

By the 1980s, as interest in critical theory spread in the field—in large part through the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies’ journal *Oppositions*—architects began to identify the most advanced sites of architectural thinking with theoretical investigation instead of with urbanism or formal research. As a result, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, studios that were largely textual in nature or that produced only representations began to proliferate in schools. If administrators and practitioners sometimes worried that such studios led to inaction or paralysis in the design studio and soon sought alternatives, these studios laid the groundwork for research studios in the vein of *Project on the City*.

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2. Peter and Alison Smithson, CIAM Grille. (© 1953 Peter and Alison Smithson.)
To this incomplete narrative of the research studio’s late emergence, we need to add the dimension of the critical. In a “theory backlash” in the pages of journals such as Praxis and Log, as well as in a recent rash of symposia at schools around the world, criticality and theory have come under attack by the proponents of “postcritical” thought, or, as it has been more recently refigured, “projective architecture.”

To address postcriticism in a broader sense is beyond the scope of this article and even superfluous. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing to a certain alliance between postcriticism and the research studio in its origins in taking the world as found, be it in the relentless collecting of imagery by the Eameses or the Smithsons’ appropriation of Duchamp. If historically derived from processes of appropriation, many research studios do eschew criticism in favor of information gathering. To some degree, Project on the City suffers from this, as Hal Foster has observed when he asked of the work, “great poetry can come of this ambivalence, but that may be all.”

Scholarship in the research studio is, unquestionably, different from what we might expect in the classroom. Often, footnotes disappear in favor of images, and inhabiting the archive is replaced by surfing the web. But does the research studio merely co-opt processes of the history and theory seminar while abandoning methodology? Should we be hasty in dismissing its products as uncritical?

To be sure, any broader notion of scholarship in the university is hard to come by. Disciplines as radically disparate as dance, physics, English, sociology, public policy, law, mathematics, journalism, nanotechnology engineering, and Japanese language do not come together easily, most especially in cases of tenure review. When interdisciplinary interaction happens, it is against the grain of the university. Nevertheless, if we can identify a shared idea of what scholarship is in the university, it would be in terms of systematic research that produces a “contribution to knowledge.”

But what sort of space does the research studio inhabit in the university? To be clear, a studio is a room in which an architect, an artist, a photographer, or dancer works. In other words, it is a place for the arts. Nor is “studio” an innocent term in the discipline as a whole. Most architects work in offices. Only recent graduates and the self-styled avant-garde (generally those who teach in universities) work in studios. A research studio, then, aspires to systematic research, but of the sort that the avant-garde might undertake, not applied, promising radical results. Based on this, works of architectural research aspire not just to represent the world but to help us look at the world in a fundamentally new way.

Perhaps the best analogy we might have for the research studio is a return to the Eameses and the emergence of the architectural research out of film, in particular the documentary. To take some of the examples we invoked: Powers of Ten, to a degree approached by precious few works in any discipline, helps us reenvision the world anew from atom to the furthest reaches of the universe. The “as found” work of the Smithsons on the East End of London (Figure 2) is a contribution to knowledge in that they used visual means to present something that was otherwise ignored and forgotten. No texts could be as compelling as the simple photographs and analyses they showed. Learning from Las Vegas and Delirious New York allowed us to see their respective cities, and indeed, the world, in fundamentally new ways.

This, then, is the question that research studios need to address, indeed it is a broader litmus test for architecture, be it postcritical, critical, or otherwise: How does it help us to reenvision the world anew? By this, architecture should not just add to the existing condition, either through replication of data, through nonlinear geometries, or exotic materials and structures, but rather it should make a contribution to knowledge. By its nature, this suggests that we should not go with the flow but rather redirect it utterly, remaking the terrain through which flows travel. If such a goal is somewhat immodest, I would nevertheless argue that the promise of such radical architecture is precisely what drives great architecture and great architectural research. To do any less would be irresponsible.

Notes
1. Pearl River Delta ran during academic year 1996–1997 and Shopping from 1997 to 1998. In 1998–1999, teams were split between Rome and
West Africa, and in 1999–2000 the dual-track investigation continued, the latter being narrowed to Lagos. Koolhaas has continued to teach various research studios, such as a project on Communism. Project, however, had a delimited run, four years to culminate in four books. Jeffrey Inaba lays out the history of the project and some of the thinking behind it—albeit without explaining the methodology involved—in “Maybe. The Harvard Project on the City asks ‘Has the City Outgrown Architecture?’” in AMOMA/Rem Koolhaas, Content (Köln: Taschen, 2004), 256–257. It is worth observing that the Project publications were extensively reworked after the studios concluded.


3. Literature on this period in pedagogy is still largely lacking, however; see Klaus Herdeg, The Decorated Diagram (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).


